

Something To **CROW** About



FWP touts the success of Montana's Roosters for Recruitment Program

By Tom Dickson. Photos by Sean R. Heavey

Parker Bradley's family doesn't own a hunting dog, but the Kalispell sixth-grader has always wanted one. So he was excited this past September 24th to hunt over a German wirehaired pointer named Junior, handled by a local member of Pheasants Forever as part of the 2022 Montana Youth Pheasant and Waterfowl Weekend.

At a local block management area, Parker and his grandpa, Vern Schrader, followed Junior over miles of upland habitat as the dog trailed fresh pheasant scent then pointed several pen-raised roosters that had been released a few days earlier. "It was awesome," Parker says.

The 11-year-old boy had shot clay pigeons several times to improve his shooting skills in the weeks before the big event. The practice paid off. Parker shot his limit of three roosters during several hours afield. "I'd never hunted pheasants before. I felt really proud of myself," he says.

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While the youth hunting weekend has been around for several years, the 2022 event (September 24-25) was the second consecutive year that included pen-reared ring-necked pheasants, a non-native species popular with upland bird hunters in Montana and across the United States.

The birds were part of a pheasant stocking and release program created by the 2021 Montana Legislature, which authorized FWP to use up to \$1 million each year to stock pheasants raised at the Montana State Prison near Deer Lodge onto suitable habitat on publicly accessible lands.

"This is a great way to give youth hunters a new opportunity for success," says FWP director Hank Worsch.

What FWP is calling the Roosters for Recruitment Program is for "youth hunters" (licensed 12- to 15-year-

TAKING FLIGHT FWP northeastern region wildlife manager Scott Thompson releases roosters at Sleeping Buffalo Wildlife Management Area near Saco. FWP put out thousands of pen-raised pheasants at WMAs across Montana in late September to give young hunters extra opportunities to be successful.

olds who have completed hunter education and are accompanied by a nonhunting adult age 18 or older), or certified and legally licensed “apprentice hunters” 10 to 15 years old (who are accompanied by a nonhunting adult at least 21 years old). The adults may help with activities such as handling hunting dogs, retrieving downed birds, and, for waterfowl, setting up decoys and calling ducks or geese.

FWP officials say Roosters for Recruitment gives young hunters a chance to experience hunting success, encouraging future participation. Studies show that anglers and hunters who catch fish and harvest game when they first start out are more likely to continue the activities when they grow older. Lack of early success leads to high drop-out rates.

Businesses happy to help

In the weeks before the special hunting weekend, FWP held kick-off events in Kalispell, Missoula, Helena, and Miles City, and at sites near Billings, Glasgow, and Great Falls. Depending on the location, young hunters and supervising adults were treated to burgers, dog-training demonstrations, and raffles for free outdoor gear.

Marc Kloker, FWP’s regional Communication and Education Program manager for northeastern Montana, says several Glasgow-area conservation groups provided prizes to the kids. “Youth hunting is such a positive thing up here that we had no problem getting donations,” he says.

Not everyone supports the pheasant-release program. Some Montana wildlife groups frown on FWP rearing and stocking pheasants on public land. They argue that pen-raised birds could spread disease to wild birds, divert public attention from habitat projects, and degrade fair chase ethics by making it too easy for young hunters to find and kill pheasants.

But Deb O’Neill, head of FWP special projects, says the birds are monitored at the rearing site for disease, and notes that department upland habitat projects are booming. Public support, she adds, is strong. “We’ve received many emails and photographs from

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors. Sean R. Heavey is a photographer based in Glasgow.



PRACTICE SESSIONS
Left: FWP held kick-off events statewide before the special youth hunting weekend to give kids a chance to learn how to sign into a Block Management Area (left), find WMAs with stocked pheasants (below), and identify birds. Right: Marc Kloker, FWP regional Communication and Education Program manager, instructs a young hunter on how to “lead” a flying pheasant.



GETTING OUT THERE
Above: At a kick-off event held at the Glasgow Trap Club, volunteers helped young hunters learn gun safety and how to shoot a shotgun. Right: A beginner hunter and a mentor set out on the Youth Pheasant and Waterfowl Weekend at the Vandalia WMA near Hinsdale. Says FWP director Hank Worsch, “This pheasant program is great for kids and families.”

parents thanking us for the program.”

Vern Schrader, a plumber in Kalispell, is a big fan of the pheasant-release program. “The more we can get these kids outdoors, the better we can keep them away from drugs and other bad influences,” he says.

Worsch compares releasing pheasants

for youth hunting to FWP stocking community fishing ponds with catchable trout. “That popular program doesn’t take anything away from our equally popular efforts to manage wild trout and protect and restore fish habitat on streams and rivers. And it doesn’t raise any

questions about fair chase fishing,” the FWP director says.

Inviting hunters in—and back

FWP officials say the program is part of a broader strategy to recruit, retain, and reactivate hunters—a nationwide initiative known as R3. The R3 strategy aims to stem declines in the number of hunters, who fund most game wildlife management and conservation with their license dollars and federal excise taxes on firearms and ammunition. Though the number of big game hunters remains steady in Montana, upland and migratory bird hunter numbers have declined over the past 20 years.

The R3 movement is supported by Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and other nationwide conservation groups concerned about decreased hunter participation and associated losses in revenue for habitat restoration and other conservation work.

For decades, Montana raised pheasants

on state-operated farms, but it phased out the work by 1982. Since then, the department has focused on protecting and improving habitat in Montana so that wild pheasants can reproduce on their own.

Unfortunately, the loss of upland habitat (especially more than 2 million federal Conservation Reserve Program acres in Montana alone) throughout the species’ range and the effects of long-term drought have significantly reduced pheasant numbers.

As recently as 2003, Montana’s statewide harvest was 163,000 roosters. But during the past five years it has averaged just 74,000 annually, according to Greg Lemon, head of the FWP Communication and Education Division. “We’re still focusing on protecting prime upland habitat, but in many cases that’s just not sufficient to provide enough birds to attract young hunters,” Lemon says. “Roosters for Recruitment is a way to get birds out on the ground to help get kids hooked on hunting.”

Looking forward to future hunts

FWP continues to fund and staff its successful Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program, which uses bird hunter license dollars and other funding to conserve and enhance upland game bird habitat and populations on lands open to public access. In 2022, Montana landowners and conservation groups partnered with FWP to conserve and enhance more than 333,000 acres of upland game bird habitat while providing nearly 800,000 acres for public upland bird hunting on more than 470 active habitat projects, according to program manager Deb Hohler. “Habitat enhancement is going great guns right now,” she says.

As for Parker, the 11-year-old bird hunter from Kalispell, he can’t wait to go bird hunting later this season with his grandpa Vern. “I think it will be awesome,” he says. 🐾

Learn more about special youth hunting opportunities at fwp.mt.gov/hunt/youth.

